

Pakistan-Iran relations revisited

Iran was the first country to recognize Pakistan as an independent state after its inception in August, 1947. In keeping with the warmth and closeness of relations between the two countries, the Shahinshah of Iran was the first Head of State to visit Pakistan in March, 1950. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah told the first Pakistani ambassador to Iran, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, that he was going to a country with which Pakistan had the most cordial relations in the world. The mutual sentiments of friendship between the two neighbouring Muslim countries were based on the solid foundation of historical ties spanning several centuries, ethnic links, shared strategic outlook, close cultural bonds, and economic complementarities buttressed by cooperation in various fields and exchange of visits by their leaders and senior officials. Since both the countries were allied with the West led by the US in the Cold War era, they became members of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 which was renamed CENTO or the Central Treaty Organization in 1959. In 1964, Pakistan and Iran joined Turkey to establish the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD). Iran extended valuable support to Pakistan in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

The advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran brought about a paradigm shift in Iran's internal and external policies. While Pakistan remained allied with the West despite the differences because of the former's nuclear programme, Iran left the alliance with the West and adopted an independent foreign policy. So instead of a shared strategic outlook, Pakistan-Iran relationship became the victim of strategic divergence with its inevitable negative consequences. Military cooperation between the two countries lost its substance and military-to-military links lost their warmth. Considering the important role that Pakistan's military establishment plays in the country's security and foreign policies, this was bound to have an adverse effect on Pakistan-Iran relations as indeed it did.

The sectarian factor became another source of discord between Pakistan and Iran after the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The perception developed in the public and the senior echelons of the Pakistan government that Iran was engaged in supporting militant Shia organizations in the country. On the other hand, the Gulf countries were suspected of supporting militant Sunni organizations. The decade of 1990's saw the rise of the monster of sectarian terrorism in Pakistan resulting in the tragic deaths of hundreds of Pakistanis belonging to one or the other sect. In the process, several Iranian officials posted in Pakistan also fell victim to acts of terrorism aggravating strains in Pakistan-Iran relations.

The proxy war between Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the fall of the Najibullah government in Kabul in April, 1992 brought their relations to the lowest ebb. While Iran supported the Northern Alliance, Pakistan extended support to the Afghan Taliban.

Consequently, the armed conflict in Afghanistan was prolonged leading ultimately to the tragic terrorist attacks of 9/11. This proxy war also had the effect of inflicting a severe damage on Pakistan-Iran relations besides creating mistrust between them. The project of regional cooperation within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) consisting of ten member states, became another victim of the acrimony and mistrust between Tehran and Islamabad.

Some attempts were made in 2000 and the beginning of 2001 to revive Pakistan-Iran relations. By that time, the intensity of the sectarian factor had subsided somewhat because the various parties realized the damaging effects of supporting extremist sectarian outfits. Mr. Hasan Rouhani, the incumbent President of Iran who was the Secretary General of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council at that time, paid a visit to Pakistan in April, 2001 to put Pakistan-Iran relations back on track. A roadmap for the purpose was signed by him and our Foreign Minister during the visit leading ultimately to President Khatami's visit to Pakistan in December, 2002. Meanwhile, 9/11 led to a U-turn in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy bringing it closer to Iran's policy. Unfortunately, the lingering mistrust between Pakistan and Iran, the American pressure, the complexity of the Afghanistan situation, the growing discord between the US and Iran concerning Iran's nuclear programme, and the Western economic sanctions against Iran did not allow Pakistan and Iran to take full advantage of the opportunities that became available after 9/11 for strengthening their bilateral relationship.

Now that Iran and P5+1 have reached an agreement on the former's nuclear programme and there are bright prospects that the crippling economic and financial sanctions against Iran would be lifted soon, another opportunity beckons both Pakistan and Iran to join hands in strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation in various fields. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit in August this year and the recent visit of Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary General of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, to Pakistan have conveyed unequivocally Tehran's desire and willingness to build up friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation with Pakistan. We must take full advantage of the opening provided by these visits to restore the traditional warmth and strength of this relationship which is vitally important for both the countries.

The starting point for this purpose should be the realization that the security and economic well-being of Pakistan and Iran are closely linked. The two countries were a source of strength to each other whenever they cooperated in dealing with important regional security issues. Both of them suffered when they worked at cross purposes. Their Afghanistan policies of 1990's were a prime example of the damaging effects of adopting confrontational approaches in dealing with important regional security issues. It behoves two brotherly countries like Pakistan and Iran to adopt the policy of mutual understanding and accommodation rather than that of confrontation whenever they are faced with issues in which their interests are competitive. Let us hope that they have drawn the right lessons from their experiences in Afghanistan during the 1990's. Pakistan and Iran should, therefore, coordinate their policies to encourage and facilitate a dialogue between the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban for the sake of national reconciliation and a political settlement in Afghanistan. Their failure to do so would prolong the armed conflict in Afghanistan and endanger regional peace and stability.

Now that the Western economic and financial sanctions against are likely to be lifted soon, we should redouble our efforts to promote cooperation with Iran in political, economic, commercial, security and cultural fields. In particular, Iran can be an important source of oil and gas for Pakistan. We should expedite the implementation of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project on our side for the import of natural gas from Iran and keep open the possibility of extending the pipeline to China, thus, linking it with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Iran can also be an attractive market for our textiles, rice and other agricultural products. Besides expanding cooperation bilaterally, Pakistan and Iran should also take steps to promote mutual cooperation at the regional level within the framework of the ECO together with other member states.

Finally, for Pakistan friendship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia is critically important. We should, therefore, encourage both of them to commence a dialogue for resolving mutual differences and establishing a security forum with the goal of settling disputes peacefully and strengthening peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. In view of the direct relevance of peace and stability in the Persian Gulf to Pakistan's security, Pakistan should play its own constructive role in such a forum.